

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2014*

**Remarks in Chicago, Illinois**

*November 25, 2014*

*The President.* Hello, Chicago. Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you so much. Everybody, have a seat. Thank you. Thank you very much. Happy early Thanksgiving, everybody. It is good to be home. Although, it's cold in Chicago. *[Laughter]* It was 60 degrees in Washington. It's not 60 degrees here. *[Laughter]*

Let me begin by thanking the Copernicus Center. *Dzien dobry* to everybody. We appreciate you. Thank you so much.

*Situation in Ferguson, MO/Public Response to Grand Jury Decision/Law Enforcement Reform Efforts*

I hope you don't mind—because obviously, there's a lot of stuff in the news—I actually need to begin by saying a few words about what's happened over the past day, not just in Ferguson, Missouri, our neighbor to the south, but all across America.

As many of you know, a verdict came down—or a grand jury made a decision yesterday that upset a lot of people. And as I said last night, the frustrations that we've seen are not just about a particular incident. They have deep roots in many communities of color who have a sense that our laws are not always being enforced uniformly or fairly. That may not be true everywhere, and it's certainly not true for the vast majority of law enforcement officials, but that's an impression that folks have, and it's not just made up. It's rooted in realities that have existed in this country for a long time.

Now, as I said last night, there are productive ways of responding and expressing those frustrations, and there are destructive ways of responding. Burning buildings, torching cars, destroying property, putting people at risk—that's destructive, and there's no excuse for it. Those are criminal acts, and people should be prosecuted if they engage in criminal acts.

But what we also saw—although, it didn't get as much attention in the media—was people gathering in overwhelmingly peaceful protest, here in Chicago, in New York, in Los Angeles, other cities. We've seen young people who were organizing and people beginning to have real conversations about how do we change the situation so that there's more trust between law enforcement and some of these communities. And those are necessary conversations to have.

We're here to talk about immigration, but part of what makes America this remarkable place is, being American doesn't mean you have to look a certain way or have a certain last name or come from a certain place; it has to do with a commitment to ideals, a belief in certain values. And if any part of the American community doesn't feel welcomed or treated fairly, that's something that puts all of us at risk, and we all have to be concerned about it.

So my message to those people who are constructively moving forward, trying to organize, mobilize, and ask hard, important questions about how we improve the situation, I want all those folks to know that their President is going to work with them. And I think you'll find a lot of—*[applause]*. Separate and apart from the particular circumstances in Ferguson, which I've—I am careful not to speak to because it's not my job as President to comment on ongoing investigations and specific cases, but the frustrations people have generally, those are rooted in some hard truths that have to be addressed.

And so I—those who are prepared to work constructively, your President will work with you. And a lot of folks, I believe, in law enforcement and a lot of folks in city halls and Governor's offices across the country want to work with you as well.

So as part of that, I've instructed Attorney General Eric Holder not just to investigate what happened in Ferguson, but also identify specific steps we can take together to set up a series of regional meetings focused on building trust in our communities. And next week, we'll bring together State and local officials and law enforcement and community leaders and faith leaders to start identifying very specific steps that we can take to make sure that law enforcement is fair and is being applied equally to every person in this country.

And we know certain things work. We know that if we train police properly, that that improves policing and makes people feel that the system is fair. We know that when we have a police force that is representative of the communities it's serving, that makes a difference. And we know that when there's clear accountability and transparency when something happens, that makes a difference. So there are specific things we can do, and the key now is for us to lift up the best practices and work, city by city, State by State, county by county, all across this country, because the problem is not just a Ferguson problem, it is an American problem. And we've got to make sure that we are actually bringing about change.

The bottom line is, nothing of significance, nothing of benefit results from destructive acts. I've never seen a civil rights law or a health care bill or an immigration bill result because a car got burned. It happened because people vote. It happened because people mobilize. It happened because people organize. It happens because people look at what are the best policies to solve the problem. That's how you actually move something forward.

So don't take the short-term, easy route and just engage in destructive behavior. Take the long-term, hard, but lasting route of working with me and Governors and State officials to bring about some real change.

And to those who think that what happened in Ferguson is an excuse for violence, I do not have any sympathy for that. I have no sympathy at all for destroying your own communities. But for the overwhelming majority of people who just feel frustrated and pained because they get a sense that maybe some communities aren't treated fairly or some individuals aren't seen as worthy as others, I understand that. And I want to work with you, and I want to move forward with you. Your President will be right there with you.

*Audience member.* Thank you, Mr. President!

*The President.* All right? So that's what we need to focus on. Let's be constructive.

### *Immigration Reform*

Now, I appreciate your patience, because I know you came here to talk about immigration. But this is relevant, because part of what America is about is stitching together folks from different backgrounds and different faiths and different ethnicities. That's what makes us special. And look, let's face it, sometimes, that's hard. Sometimes, that's hard to do. But it's worthwhile; it's worth doing.

If you go to—I was just traveling in Asia—you go to Japan, they don't have problems with certain folks being discriminated against because mostly everybody is Japanese. [*Laughter*] You know? I mean—but here, part of what's wonderful about America is also what makes our democracy hard sometimes, because sometimes, we get attached to our particular tribe, our particular race, our particular religion, and then we start treating other folks differently.

And that sometimes has been a bottleneck to how we think about immigration. If you look at the history of immigration in this country, each successive wave, there have been periods where the folks who were already here suddenly say, well, I don't want those folks. Even though the only people who have the right to say that are some Native Americans.

Now, it is fitting that I've come here, back home to Chicago. Because Chicago has always been a city of immigrants. And that's still true in the neighborhoods that define this city. Especially on the North Side up here. I mean, there's—[laughter]—we've got everything up here. [Laughter]

No, you go to the public schools around here, and you got 50, 60, 70 different languages being spoken. From Andersonville to Chinatown, from Devon to Greektown, Pilsen, Ukrainian Village, immigrants have made this "City of Broad Shoulders" their home. We are Swedish and Polish and German and Italian. Everybody is Irish on St. Patrick's Day. [Laughter]

We've got names like Pat Quinn, our Governor, and Luis Gutierrez, our Congressman; Jan Schakowsky, another Congresswoman; Brad Schneider, Congressman; Rahm Emanuel—[applause]. All mixed up. [Laughter] I don't mean Rahm. I mean all of us, together. [Laughter] It is true that Rahm speaks a language that can't be translated in front of children. [Laughter] Although, he's a mayor now, so he doesn't do that anymore, I'm sure. [Laughter]

Anyone who's driven along the Kennedy has seen the silhouettes of steeples jabbing at the sky, steeples as diverse as the houses of worship that they belong to and the immigrants that built them and the communities who call those neighborhoods home to this day.

Today we're here at a Polish community center, and I just—I was just meeting with a group of Chicago's business and civic leaders, representing people who come here from Mexico and China and Poland and Ireland.

You just heard Billy Lawless, who was a successful business owner back in Galway. But he says—and I'm quoting here—"I had a thing for the United States. I always wanted to see if I could hack it with you guys." And so, 16 years ago, Billy comes to Chicago, opens up an Irish pub, because there was a shortage of Irish pubs in Chicago, clearly. [Laughter] Then, he opened another restaurant, then another, and then another. And 4 months ago, Billy and his wife became American citizens, and they voted for the very first time as Americans on November 4. And you can often find their son, also named Billy, charming the heck out of customers at all hours of the day and night. Together, they've gone from employing 10 workers to employing more than 250 workers.

And you just heard what Billy said: "This is what we immigrants do." One study a few years ago found that immigrants start more than a quarter of all new businesses in the United States—one-quarter of them. Another study found that immigrants and their children start over 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies. Think about that. But it makes sense, because being a nation of immigrants gives us this huge entrepreneurial advantage over other nations. If you were willing to strike out, go to someplace new, build from scratch, you've got that sense of being willing to take risks and being able to build something from scratch; you have that spirit. That's part of what the American spirit is all about. It's part of what drove us westward across the frontier, not feeling like what's in front of you is the only thing that's possible, but that something else is possible.

And because of those businesses started by immigrants, we all benefit. It means more jobs. It means more growth for everybody.

Now, as I said last week, our immigration system has been broken for a long time. Families who try to come here the right way can get stuck in line for years. Business owners who treat their employees right often see the competition exploit undocumented workers to undercut businesses. All of us, I think, don't like the idea that somebody can reap the rewards of living in America without its responsibilities. And there are people who desperately want to embrace those responsibilities, but they have no way of coming out of the shadows and getting right with the law. So everybody is stuck with a system that doesn't work for anybody.

Now, a year and a half ago, we had a big majority—Democrats, Republicans, Independents—in the United States Senate, and they came together, they passed a bipartisan bill to fix this broken system. And the bill wasn't perfect. It didn't have everything I wanted; it didn't have everything that everybody—anybody wanted. But it did reflect common sense. It was this huge improvement.

We would have doubled the number of Border Patrol agents. So if you are concerned about illegal migration, it would have made our borders that much tougher. It would have made our legal immigration system smarter and fairer and reduce some of the backlog that hampers families from getting here. It would have given millions of people a chance to earn their citizenship the right way. And independent experts said that, over the next two decades, the new law would grow our economy and shrink our deficit.

And had the House of Representatives allowed a simple yes or no vote on that kind of bill, it would have passed. That's all they needed to do, just call the bill. It would be law right now. We'd be well on our way to solving the problems in the system. I'd be implementing those provisions. But for a year and a half, over 500 days, Republican leaders in the House simply refused to allow a vote. They wouldn't let it come to the floor.

Now, I still believe the best way to solve this problem is by working together to pass that kind of commonsense law. When I was talking to Billy and the other civic leaders, there were things that can only be solved by Congress. But until then, there are actions I have the legal authority to take that will help make our immigration system more fair and more just. And I took them last week. They were the right thing to do.

So we're devoting more resources for law enforcement to stem the flow of illegal crossings at the borders and to speed the return of those who do cross over. We're initiating smarter reforms so high-skilled immigrants and graduates and entrepreneurs can stay and contribute to our economy. And I'm taking new steps to deal responsibly with the millions of undocumented immigrants who already live here, including here in Chicago.

Now, I've said this before, so I just want to be clear, and I say it in front of immigrant rights groups all the time: Undocumented workers who broke our immigration laws should be held accountable. There's a particular category, and that's those who may be dangerous. It's a small minority, but it's a significant one. And that's why, over the past 6 years, deportations of criminals are up 80 percent. And we'll keep focusing our limited enforcement resources on those who actually pose a threat to our security. Felons, not families. Gangs, not some mom or dad who are working hard just trying to make a better life for their kids.

But even——

*Audience member.* Sorry, Mr. President, but that has been a lie. You have been deporting families——

*Audience members.* Boo!

*The President.* All right. Okay.

*Audience member.* I will never thank you for continuing deportation——

*The President.* All right. That's fine. You've made your point. All right.

*Audience member.* Sit down!

*Audience member.* Not one more! Stop deportations!

*Audience member.* Not one more!

*Audience member.* [*Inaudible*]—to a lot of people that you did not take into account. [*Inaudible*]—and going into our communities and labeling people with families as criminals. And that is not the truth! You cannot keep saying felons, not families.

*The President.* Okay, I've heard you. All right.

*Audience member.* Republicans are also not the only ones playing. You've got Rahm Emanuel over there who advised against reform.

*The President.* Okay.

*Audience member.* Republicans are also not the only ones playing. [*Inaudible*]—deportations.

*The President.* I understand. The——

*Audience members.* Boo!

*The President.* Listen, hold on. Hold on. Hold on. Young lady. Don't just start yelling, young ladies. Sir, why don't you sit down too. Listen——

*Audience member.* There is no justice anywhere——

*The President.* The—here, can I just say this? All right, I've listened to you. I heard you. I heard you. I heard you. All right? Now, I've been respectful. I let you holler. All right? So let me just—let me—[*applause*]. Nobody is removing you. I've heard you. But you've got to listen to me too. All right? So—[*applause*]. And I understand you may agree—disagree. I understand you may disagree. But we've got to be able to talk honestly about these issues. All right?

Now, you're absolutely right that there have been significant numbers of deportations. That's true. But what you're not paying attention to is the fact that I just took action to change the law. Now—[*applause*]. So that's point number one.

Point number two: The way the change in the law works is that we're reprioritizing how we enforce our immigration laws generally. So not everybody qualifies for being able to sign up and register, but the change in priorities applies to everybody.

The point is that, though I understand why you might have yelled at me a month ago—[*laughter*]—although, I disagree with some of your characterizations—it doesn't make much sense to yell at me right now, when we're making changes.

So the point is—but the point is, let's make sure that you get the facts and that you know exactly what we're doing. And then if you have disagreements, then you can work through all the immigrant rights organizations that we work with to try to address some of your concerns. Right? So—[*applause*].

But what—[*laughter*—but here's what won't work. What won't work is folks—what won't work is folks just shouting at each other. All right? So I've been respectful. I responded to your question. I'd ask you now to let me speak to all the other people who are here. All right? Okay.

Now—[*applause*].

*Audience member.* [*Inaudible*]

*Audience members.* Boo!

*The President.* Okay. It's good to be back in Chicago. [*Laughter*] So—because everybody has got something to say. But I'm not going to be able to have a conversation with each of you separately. [*Laughter*] So there are other ways of engaging. Just sit down. I just went off script for a pretty long time. [*Laughter*] I don't mind. I know people are passionate about this. But be respectful of everybody who's here. All right?

Now, let me get to the point that I was making, which is, even if we deported all the criminals, folks who had actually done bad things, there are millions of people here who are good people, but have still broken the immigration laws. And they're found in every State, every race, every nationality. Tracking down and rounding up and deporting millions of people is not realistic. It's not who we are. It's not what America should be.

On the other hand—and this sometimes is not acknowledged—if you came here illegally, you are cutting in front of the line of the folks who were trying to come here legally, which also is not fair. That's not fair. That doesn't make people bad people. But it does mean that you cut in front of the line, because there are a lot of folks who are waiting to try to get here legally.

So the deal that we're putting forward is this: If you've been here for more than 5 years, if you have children who are citizens or legal residents, if you register and pass a criminal background check and pay your fair share of taxes, then you can apply to stay temporarily. You can come out of the shadows. You can get right with the law.

This isn't amnesty or legalization or even a pathway to citizenship, because that's not something I can do. That is something only Congress can do. It also doesn't apply to anyone who has come to this country recently or might come illegally in the future, because borders do mean something. So it's accountability. It's a commonsense approach that allows me to exercise legal authorities that I have in order to make sure that we're preventing families from being broken apart.

And I am the first one to acknowledge that part of the reason that this has become important to me is, you're right, there have been times where families got broken apart, while I've been President. And it's heartbreaking. And it's not right. So until Congress does a complete fix, what we're saying is, if you have deep ties here and you start paying your fair share of taxes, then we won't deport you and separate you from your kids.

And we will not—[*applause*]. And even if you do not fully qualify, we will still try to reprioritize how we're enforcing the laws—which we have to do—in a way that is less likely to break families apart. Because the system is broken.

And one of the reasons why this is important is because immigrants are good for the economy. We keep on hearing that they're bad. But a report by my Council of Economic Advisers put out last week shows how the actions we're taking will grow our economy for everybody. By 2024, the actions that I'm taking will add at least \$90 billion to our gross domestic product. And this economic growth will reduce our deficit by \$25 billion. And these

actions will grow our labor force by nearly 150,000 people, and they will boost wages for American-born workers.

Now, if we passed a comprehensive law, it would be even better. We'd grow even faster, and the deficit would come down even faster. But even the steps we're taking now will make a difference.

And these actions are lawful. They're not only lawful, they're the kinds of actions that have been taken by every President for the past 50 years. When I hear some of my Republican friends talk about this, I try to remind them: President Reagan took action to keep families together. The first President Bush took action to shield about 1.5 million people. That was about 40 percent of undocumented immigrants in America at the time.

So when folks in Congress question my authority to make our immigration system work better, I've one answer: Pass a bill. Pass a bill. [Applause] Go ahead and pass a bill. I want to work with both parties on a more permanent legislative solution. I know that's what Luis Gutierrez wants and Jan Schakowski wants and Brad Schneider wants. They've been at the forefront fighting for a more permanent solution. And the day I sign a comprehensive immigration bill into law, then the actions I take will no longer be necessary.

But in the meantime, I'm going to do what I can to make this system work better. And in the meantime, Washington shouldn't let disagreements over one issue be a deal breaker on every issue. That's not how our democracy works. You can't disagree with one thing and then just say, all right, I'm going to take my ball away and go home. [Laughter] And Congress certainly should not shut down the Government again over this. Americans are tired of gridlock. We're ready to move forward.

As you can imagine, I've gotten a lot of letters and a lot of emails about immigration over the past few days. And some have said it was a mistake for me to act. But then, others remind me why I had to. One letter I got last week came from Brett Duncan of Dawsonville, Georgia. And Brett is a Republican, and so he doesn't really agree with me about anything. [Laughter] Well, maybe everything. His ancestors came over from Scotland before the Civil War, so his immigration status is pretty much settled. [Laughter] But he's done missionary work overseas. He knows what it's like to be a stranger. And over the years, he's gotten to know a lot of the new immigrants in his community. And here's what he said. He said: "Their children are as American as I am. It would be senseless to deport their parents. It would be bad for America." "I believe," Brett wrote, "that a human being, created in the very image of Almighty God, is the greatest resource we have in this country."

So we're not a nation that kicks out strivers and dreamers who want to earn their piece of the American Dream. We are a nation that fundamentally is strong, is special, is exceptional, because we find ways to welcome people, fellow human beings, children of God, into the fold, and harness their talents to make the future brighter for everybody.

We didn't raise the Statue of Liberty with her back to the world. We did it facing the world, her light, her beacon shining. And whether we are—whether we crossed the Atlantic or the Pacific or the Rio Grande, we all shared one thing, and that's the hope that America would be the place where we could believe as we choose and pray as we choose and start a business without paying a bribe or—and that we could vote in an election without fearing reprisal and that the law would be enforced equally for everybody, regardless of what you looked like and what your last name was.

That's the ideal that binds us all together. That's what's at stake when we have conversations about immigration. That's what's at stake when we have conversations about Ferguson: Are we going to live up to those ideals of who we are as a people? And it falls on all of us to hand down to our kids a country that lives up to that promise, where America is the place where we can make it if we try.

So thank you very much, everybody. God bless you. God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:05 p.m. at the Copernicus Center. In his remarks, he referred to restaurateur Billy Lawless, cofounder, Chicago Celts for Immigration Reform and Illinois Business Immigration Coalition, and vice president, Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, who introduced the President; and Anne Lawless, wife of Mr. Lawless. He also referred to S. 744.

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